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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 005002

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2017
TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MARR CO
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE - Q2 '07

REF: A. 06 BOGOTA 9448

- 1B. BOGOTA 297
- 1C. BOGOTA 3096
- 1D. BOGOTA 4746
- 1E. BOGOTA 2839

Classified By: CDA Milton K. Drucker
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) GOC efforts in the second quarter continued to erode FARC and ELN fighting strength, while new strategies effectively targeted other illegal armed groups. FARC attacks centered on vital drug trafficking areas in Tolima Department, Cali, and Buenaventura, where the group conducted a series of bombings, and reflected the FARC's degraded capacity to engage in conventional operations. In the 'Omega' zone, frequent clashes continued as the FARC reinforced fronts to protect coca growing. Three new Army brigades achieved good results in joint combat with Marines in the north in preparation for deployment to Nariño. The FARC avoided engagement with the military near the Venezuelan border, where ELN and new criminal groups bore the brunt of military and law enforcement action. The GOC uncovered several instances of FARC intimidation and infiltration aimed to manipulate local elections scheduled for October. End Summary.

Long-Term Progress Against Armed Groups

12. (U) GOC efforts to strengthen security forces and refine strategies against illegal armed groups (IAGs) are slowly achieving results. The FARC's ability to carry out offensive operations, inflict casualties on the military, control territory, and intimidate local populations is continuing to deteriorate slowly. The ELN remains weak and is using an on-again, off-again peace process with the GOC to relieve the stress caused by GOC and FARC attacks. Other IAGs made up of small numbers of ex-paramilitaries engaged almost exclusively in drug trafficking have been damaged by new GOC interagency task forces that target their criminal activity.

FARC Attacks in Southwest

¶13. (U) Terrorist attacks centered on Valle and Tolima, driven by the FARC's focus on drug income, a need to control mobility corridors, and an inability to engage in conventional combat. In Valle, a security crackdown in Buenaventura was followed by a series of FARC-sponsored bombings, including one that destroyed police headquarters in Cali (Ref C). From June 20-22, eleven bombs were planted in and around Buenaventura, reportedly in retaliation for the death of FARC militia leader 'JJ' at the hands of the military (Ref D). In neighboring Tolima, the FARC twice bombed the Ibagué bus company owned by a mayoral candidate and attacked a rural police post near Ibagué with gas cylinder bombs. The FARC attacked Rioblanco's public square with rifles and mortars and was repelled from an assault on Planadas.

¶14. (C) Tolima contains vital logistics routes, connecting inland coca cultivation to Valle's Pacific coast shipment points. Drug trafficking activity has grown in the southwest following military pressure in other regions. Increased military presence and intelligence successes against the FARC's command structure prevented the group from mounting large-scale conventional assaults. Instead, the FARC used terrorist acts to avoid confrontation and draw public forces into cities and away from drug routes.

FARC Defends Coca-Growing Territories

¶15. (C) Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O) concentrated its efforts east and north of Macarena ridge in Meta Department, where the FARC defended its coca fields in the national park.

JTF-O commanders said the FARC drew forces from other regions to reinforce this critical zone, where an estimated one-third of total guerrilla forces now operate. The FARC continued to create 'inter-front' units to take combat pressure off fronts involved in the drug trade, allowing them more latitude in moving drugs and supplies. JTF-O's eight offensive brigades frequently engaged FARC forces but did not achieve the large scale takedowns of the first quarter. It is too early to determine whether small unit tactics introduced this year by JTF-O will bear fruit. Helicopter crashes and mechanical problems cut into JTF-O's limited mobility and put an end to fly over psyops messages. The broadcasts had yielded key FARC desertions and actionable intelligence. JTF-O mobile Army brigades integrated police in their ranks, bringing needed investigative and arrest authorities.

New Units Show Strength

¶16. (C) In the northern Montes de María region (Sucre / Bolívar / Magdalena), law enforcement and the military coordinated action against the two FARC fronts from which Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo escaped in January 2007. The units combined urban combat with legal prosecution, yielding more than 50 arrests and 50 FARC killed in action. Military pressure on the 53-member Revolutionary People's Army (ERP) led to its complete demobilization. Marines and three mobile brigades comprising the Joint Force of Decisive Action ('FUCAD') operated in the area prior to deployment to more intense conflict zones of Narino and Tolima/Huila in late 2007. Officials are optimistic that FUCAD success can be replicated against illegal armed groups in Narino, where the Army has two territorial battalions lacking mobility (Ref E).

Action vs. IAGs and ELN

¶17. (C) In the northeast Venezuela border region the FARC

avoided engagement while the ELN and new criminal groups bore the brunt of GOC action. In Catatumbo (Norte de Santander), the first of twelve inter-agency "Search Blocks" comprised of military and law enforcement showed good results against illegal armed groups. The Army reported seven engagements with "Aguilas Negras" (12 members killed), three with ELN (two killed), and one with FARC (none killed). The ELN twice ambushed Army patrols in the area, killing four soldiers. A cross-section of criminal groups including ELN and FARC reportedly cooperated in Catatumbo in the cross-border drugs trade. In the Sierra Nevada region (Cesar / La Guajira), FARC activity was low, likely due to the deaths of two FARC deputy commanders. The ELN remained weak in the region, with 16 members killed in ten clashes in which the COLAR suffered no casualties. The Army also rescued two wounded minors who had been forcibly recruited into the ELN.

Other Conflict Zones

¶ 18. (C) The fiercest fighting occurred in Antioquia and Arauca. In Antioquia, frequent Army operations targeted a range of FARC fronts who had attacked civilians to enforce extortion demands. Sixteen ELN were also killed, including nine at Anori. Police arrested two fugitive ex-AUC leaders aka 'HH' and 'Rene.' The tridepartment zone of Arauca / Boyaca / Casanare was a four-way contest for control by the Colombian military, FARC, ELN, and new criminal groups, causing 400 new displaced persons, increased mine field casualties, and a FARC massacre of 13 civilians. In the southern department of Putumayo an aggressive new brigade commander stepped up offensives against two key FARC finance and logistical fronts involved in drug trafficking along the Ecuador border. In Caqueta the local FARC front attempted to regain ground with an intimidation campaign against newly resettled campesinos cooperating with the GOC.

FARC Pre-Election Activities

¶ 19. (U) A FARC political operative in Santander was captured carrying a notebook with FARC plans to pressure candidates into supporting the FARC ahead of October local elections,. In Ovejas (Sucre) and Planadas (Tolima) two mayors and a handful of local officials were arrested for collaboration with the FARC, including routing government contracts to FARC front businesses. The FARC targeted Neiva (Huila) Mayor Cielo Gonzalez in multiple assassination attempts this year. In May, a candidate for Huila mayor was arrested for rebellion with ties to the FARC. In recent elections the FARC has been more focused on development of illicit local networks and intimidation of candidates, and less on election day violence.

Drucker